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..S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 PANAMA 002369

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/CCA, WHA/AND
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2015

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SUBJECT: PANAMANIAN PRESIDENT TORRIJOS ON THE HUSTINGS WITH
AMBASSADOR EATON

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (S) President Torrijos invited Ambassador Eaton to accompany him on a November 25 helicopter visit to Cocle Province for a series of civic, cultural and political events. With each mile separating him from Panama City, Torrijos relaxed and transformed into a gregarious politician, enthusiastically greeting people along the way, giving several stem-winding speeches, and clearly connecting with his audiences. During private conversations throughout the trip, the Ambassador raised Torrijos's November 30 trip to Cuba, agricultural trade issues, the revocation of Supreme Court Justice Winston Spadafora's visa, the USG's apparently thwarted ambition to provide cell phone intercept technology to an anti-drug unit of the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), the Costa Rican border, the Free Trade Agreement, President Bush's visit to Panama, and Panama's upcoming chairmanship of SICA (Central American Security Integration). End Summary.

Trip To Cocle Province

2. (U) President Torrijos invited Ambassador Eaton to accompany him (along with the Ministers of Health and Public Works) on a Friday, November 25 helicopter trip to the Cocle province towns of Aguadulce and Ola.

Torrijos Trip To Cuba

3. (S) Torrijos told Ambassador of his plans for a November 30 trip to Cuba to accompany 78 Panamanians, with airfare paid by Venezuela, to receive free cataract surgery from Cuban physicians. Torrijos claimed that the visit partly is an attempt to show Chavez that he has an "independent" channel of communication to Cuba. (COMMENT: Some of what Torrijos had to say was eyewash that was mostly for our consumption. On Cuba, Torrijos's comment that he's trying to maintain "Chavez-free" access to Castro is a stretch. Castro himself will decide how warm relations will become. As always, we are a bit puzzled by the obeisance that the GOP feels compelled to show to Cuba or why Torrijos should feel compelled to return to Cuba at the head of a non-official delegation so soon after his August 2005 trip to reestablish diplomatic relations. There are most likely several reasons. First of all, Torrijos faces no political down-side domestically. By going, he is associating himself with a Cuban program that benefits poor Panamanians. Also, his trip pleases the pro-Cuban faction within the PRD, also at little cost. His comment about maintaining lines of communication without Chavez is silly. Torrijos was not concerned about Chavez when he actually was an issue some months back, when the Embassy warned him that Chavez would try to intrude (and did intrude) when the GOP traveled to Havana to re-establish diplomatic relations in August. END COMMENT)

Agriculture Issues

4. (S) Torrijos said he plans to remove phyto-sanitary controls out of the Ministry of Agriculture, which he acknowledged is controlled by cattle ranchers. Those issues, he said, need to be handled independently, transparently and impartially. (COMMENT: This was apparently an attempt by Torrijos to assuage US concerns about protracted delays in issuance of U.S. beef import permits. END COMMENT) The reorganization plans will be made public in January.

Spadafora Visa

5. (S) Ambassador informed Torrijos that the Embassy was moving ahead with the revocation of Supreme Court Justice Winston Spadafora's U.S. visa and would inform Spadafora on November 30. Torrijos asked Ambassador not to announce the revocation, claiming that he is working with newly named Supreme Court Chief Justice Graciela Dixon, to pressure change and possibly resignations. Dixon would be a good partner in cleaning up the Court, Torrijos said, but he feared a visa revocation would make his negotiations with

Dixon "more difficult." Ambassador told Torrijos (to his evident disappointment) that Spadafora's visa had already been revoked but that the Embassy did not plan to make a public statement other than to confirm the revocation, if asked. Ambassador told Torrijos that Spadafora lost his visa because his corrupt practices and activities as Supreme Court Justice were undermining democratic and judicial institutions in Panama. (COMMENT: Embassy confirmed the revocation of Spadafora's visa on November 30, as rumors blanketed the city. We are skeptical about Torrijos's suggestions that he and Graciela Dixon are going to clean up the Court. However, seeing is believing. We may assume that Torrijos has his own reasons for wishing that the revocation never happened or that news never got out, but we doubt that those reasons are the ones he gave. END COMMENT)

DEA's Listening Devices Thwarted

16. (S) Torrijos said that he is determined to keep proffered cell phone listening devices, to be supplied by DEA, out of the hands of the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), which, he said, had spied on him when he was a candidate for president. Torrijos said he wanted the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad (the "Consejo") to manage the project from the Presidency (i.e., close to him). Ambassador explained that giving such technology to the Consejo would be problematic, since U.S. laws required that it be handled through judicial/law enforcement (i.e., Attorney General) channels. Torrijos bristled, and indicated that he would buy the necessary equipment himself if the U.S. couldn't provide it. He said he is preparing legislation to permit the use of telephone intercepts under carefully controlled circumstances to prevent its use for "political" or "extra-legal" purposes. Ambassador reiterated that the USG still wants to cooperate and support Panama in the law-enforcement arena and would look into what the USG legally can and cannot do. (COMMENT: Torrijos may not want the PTJ and the Attorney General to have the capability of listening to telephone conversations because it could reveal wrongdoing, which may eventually be traced back to the GOP or the Presidency. There is also the issue of depositing the power under the control of the President without accountability. END COMMENT)

Costa Rican Frontier

17. (S) Torrijos confided that he has been speaking with Costa Rican officials about launching a joint intelligence operation to round up gun runners operating between Costa Rica and Panama. Almost in the same breath, Torrijos lamented his inability to get the Costa Ricans interested in building a bridge to facilitate cross-border trade near Bocas del Toro.

Free Trade Agreement

18. (C) Ambassador Eaton shared his fears that the next "round" of talks with USTR might be the last chance for an agreement. He added that he sensed diminishing patience in Washington for protracted discussions. The Ambassador said that he hoped that Commerce and Trade Minister Ferrer will go to Washington with Panama's best and final offer. Torrijos gulped and soberly said that the two sides are close to an agreement and that Ferrer would indeed go to Washington ready to close the deal.

SICA

19. (C) Torrijos mentioned with great pride that he would chair the Central American Security Integration (SICA) starting in January. He said this is an opportunity to advance regional security integration issues, but did not provide any details of specific plans or initiatives.

President Bush's Visit

10. (S) Torrijos is evidently still basking in the afterglow of President Bush's early November visit to Panama. He mentioned that First Lady Laura Bush's office had called the First Lady's office to discuss bird migratory patterns in an effort to focus on possible dates for a follow-up visit of Mrs. Bush to Panama. Torrijos also said that former President Bush plans to visit Panama soon on a private fishing visit.

Comment: Atmospherics

11. (S) Torrijos genuinely seemed to enjoy being on the hustings. He personally drove his SUV from the helicopter to the various events, honking his horn at passersby, stopping to chat with folks along the road and on their front porches, calling out to residents (by name). He glad-handed enthusiastically, sweeping children and babies into his arms (for great photo ops). His speeches were lively (and funny), passionate, and clearly connected with

his audience.

More Atmospheric

12. (S) Ambassador also was struck by the number of people who carried photos and posters of Torrijos's father, the former military dictator Gen. Omar Torrijos. Martin Torrijos seems to have a similar populist bent. In unguarded comments throughout the day, Torrijos revealed himself as a man determined to do the right thing and to improve conditions in Panama. His heart seems in the right place. His execution needs to improve to make his dreams a reality.
EATON